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How the Army Keeps Tabs on the Citizenry

When Thomas Jefferson remarked that "eternal vigilance is the price of liberty," he had in mind a vigilance by free men against the encroachments of governmental authority. But the United States Army of late has got the admonition turned round. It has taken it upon itself to maintain a vigilant surveillance of citizen activities it deems dangerous, thus employing its authority — whether it understands what it is doing or not — to limit liberty by making unorthodox associations and dissenting opinions seem costly and unsafe. The Army is exercising, in short, what Sen. Sam Ervin has called a "deterrent power over the individual rights of American citizens."

In a signal service to the public, Sander Vanocur devoted his First Tuesday program on the NBC network a week ago to an examination, as he put it, of "the use of United States Army Intelligence Agents to spy on American citizens." He presented before his cameras an astounding parade of real and indubitably alive former military intelligence agents who recounted activities which can only be described as chilling. One former agent told of masquerading as a newspaper reporter to glean information about the Southern Christian Leadership Conference; another told of infiltrating antiwar groups and student movement groups in the Washington area; still another told of surveillance at the gravesite of Dr. Martin Luther King "to listen in on the crowd of mourners to see if there were possibly any racial overtones that might develop into a riot or a demonstration."

Reports of these undercover operatives were stored and computerized by the Army in a vast "intelligence" operation designed, apparently, to make known to military authorities the identity

of persons who might be "agitators" or "subversives" or "militants" so that, in an emergency, they could be rounded up and kept from making "trouble." Even the Republican and Democratic nominating conventions of 1968 were sedulously monitored by the Army, according to Mr. Vanocur. And constant surveillance was maintained over such events as the Poor People's march on Washington and the Moratorium demonstration here a year ago.

There is nothing new about military intelligence, or even about the fact that it is carried on at home as well as abroad. Mr. Vanocur's service lies in his dramatic reminder to the American people of the domestic peril it presents to them. In the Washington Monthly for January, 1970, Christopher H. Pyle, a former captain in Army Intelligence, told in detail of the military surveillance that is mounted within our borders, asserting that "nearly 1,000 plainclothes investigators, working out of some 300 offices from coast to coast, keep track of political protests of all kinds—from Klan rallies in North Carolina to antiwar speeches at Harvard." Senator Ervin has thundered about the activity in the Senate and has demanded explanations of it from Army authorities. But one is left with a feeling, as happens so often in these situations, that the Army has redoubled its efforts as it has diminished its candor.

Senator Ervin's subcommittee on constitutional rights will probably hold hearings on military snooping some time after the first of the year, and it is high time. For this business of vigilance and liberty cuts two ways, and it is only by forewarning that a free citizenry is forearmed in defense of its essential liberties.